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It's Mall for the Best

State-of-the-Art Retail Therapy

by Victor Dorff

For many families, successfully removing two thousand acres of agricultural land from the production of lima beans would have been enough of a contribution to humanity. If the Segerstroms had done nothing else, millions of children at dinner tables everywhere would still have been forever in their debt. But that was only the beginning for the Orange County mavericks who took that land in 1967 and turned it into the South Coast Plaza, the quintessential upscale retail center in Costa Mesa, California.

The South Coast Plaza bills itself as a luxury shopping resort destination, with hundreds of exclusive boutiques, top-notch restaurants, and cultural attractions meant to lure tourists from around the country and the world. Everything about the place is designed as a consumer's delight -- from the open spaces built for window-shopping to the indoor bistros perfect for people-watching.



Inside the stores, the mood seemed more festive than businesslike. At the only Rolex store in the country, for example, white-gloved sales people presented jewel-encrusted watches to eager customers, who appeared to be enjoying the very act of trying them on and imagining all the places they could go to show them off. Wall-mounted display cases exhibited one-of-a-kind timepieces, like the one made of meteorite fragments.

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Would-be fragrance-ologists at Jo Malone's were combining exotic scents to make their own signature perfumes and colognes.

At the Sony store, people who still don't have a flat-screen, high-definition television can see what they're missing, while repeating silently "What am I waiting for?" over and over. The latest electronic book-replacement device is also on display, along with cameras, phones, iPods, iPod-clones, and every conceivable attachment and gadget fit for today's technophile. Of course, if you are one of tomorrow's technophiles, there is also an Apple Store in the complex.



Through forty years of growth, the South Coast Plaza has evolved into an urban center in its own right. The Segerstroms have set out to create a walking environment, similar to what one would find in cities on the East Coast or in Europe. A series of pedestrian bridges connects various parts of the complex.

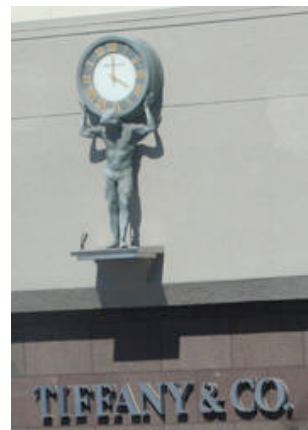


The Bridge of Gardens, designed by architect Katherine Gustafson, provides a treat for the eye, with its graceful curves passing over a busy street to link two of the Plaza's retail areas. The Unity Bridge leads to the Westin Hotel, built where the Segerstrom family of ranchers once had its dairy, and to the adjacent Orange County Performing Arts Center and the nearby South Coast Repertory theatre.

To put the size and scope of the place into perspective, the retail area of the South Coast Plaza alone is 2.8 million square feet, more than half the size of the world's smallest country. With 23 million people passing through each year, the place is nearly as busy as Hong Kong's airport. And the \$1.5 billion dollars spent annually is more than the Gross Domestic Product of Belize.

All this, and it's "freeway-close" -- and only minutes away from John Wayne Airport. That means it's possible to fly in, spend a full day shopping and eating, then walk to an evening of entertainment. After a nightcap, you can stroll to a nearby hotel for a good night sleep. If you still have the strength the next day, you can start all over again when the stores reopen. Otherwise, perhaps The Spa will rejuvenate you and get you back out there shopping, eating, walking, or whatever else your heart desires.

By the way, rumor has it that a theme-park or two are



also in the area, but there really wasn't enough time to look into that.

Websites:

South Coast Plaza (retail shopping center): www.southcoastplaza.com

South Coast Repertory Theater: www.scr.org

Orange County Performing Arts Center: www.ocpac.org

For more on the wide range of luxury hotels, restaurants, and attractions up and down the coast of Orange County: www.theoceanfrontca.com

In response to the flagging economy, on December 20, 2006, the President of the United States told Americans, "I encourage you all to go shopping more," and Victor Dorff has been doing his part ever since.

Photos by Lisa Sonne

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